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THE EVOLUTION OF THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL

V. FROM EZEKIEL TO NEHEMIAH

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Ezekiel, who, as a prophet in Babylonia, had so efficiently aided the work of Jeremiah during the six years immediately preceding the fall of Jerusalem, continued his prophetic work among the captives for more than fifteen years after the destruction of his native city. Before the close of his life he drew up a plan for the reorganization of the political and religious polity of his people, when their institutions should be again established in their own land. This plan, thrown into the form of visions, now occupies chaps. 40-48 of the book of Ezekiel.

In Ezekiel two streams of influence, once antagonistic to each other, met and were reconciled. He was by birth a priest and by calling a prophet. The traditions of the priesthood were dear to him on account of early association and personal participation; the moral and spiritual aspirations of the prophets fired his soul and commanded the devotion of his powers. He therefore undertook to shape the ritual of the priesthood so that it should become an instrument for the preservation and expression of the prophetic ideals. In this undertaking he was but carrying on the work of the Deuteronomist, for, as previously pointed out, the Deuteronomic code was a fusion of ritual with prophetic ideals.

In this brief sketch we can notice but one aspect of Ezekiel's work, but it is the part of it which most profoundly affected the institutions of Judaism. In Deuteronomy priests and Levites were synonymous terms; every Levite was a potential priest (see e.g., Deut. 18:1-5). This Ezekiel changed. He tells us (44:8-14) that in former times the menial work of the sanctuary, such as keeping the gates and slaying the sacrifices, had been performed by foreigners. In the future he declares that this shall not be done, but those Levites who formerly officiated as

priests in the high places shall be deposed from their priesthood and shall in future be degraded to this menial service. Thus Ezekiel created a new class of temple servants by creating this distinction between priests and Levites. It is a distinction unknown to the earlier religion, but everywhere assumed in the priestly laws. All these laws are, accordingly, later than Ezekiel.

After the death of Ezekiel the Babylonian empire gradually waned. About 550 Cyrus the Great overthrew the empire of the Medes and laid the foundations of the Persian empire. The succeeding years were occupied by his brilliant conquests, of which the overthrow of Croesus, king of Lydia, in 546 was but one. These brilliant achievements of the new conqueror were known to the Hebrew captives in Babylon, among whom a new prophet now arose. The name of this prophet has been lost. Scholars call him the "second Isaiah," because in the course of the centuries his book was bound up with the work of Isaiah, the son of Amoz, and now forms chaps. 40-55 of our Book of Isaiah.

This nameless prophet, one of the world's greatest, was an exponent of the monotheistic faith of his prophetic predecessors. He foresaw that Cyrus, who was everywhere so irresistible, would conquer Babylon, and with that magnificent faith which sees the manifestations of a living God in the events of contemporary history he declared that Cyrus was Yahweh's creature, and that it was for Yahweh and for Yahweh's people, Israel, that Cyrus was winning his victories. When Babylon fell into his hands, and perhaps even before, Cyrus issued an edict permitting all captive peoples to return to their lands and rebuild their institutions. This was a reversal of a policy pursued by Assyrians and Babylonians for two hundred years. These powers had torn nations to shreds to prevent rebellion; Cyrus proposed to bind the people to him by kindness and gratitude. Foreseeing that through the victory of Cyrus this opportunity for Israel to return to her land would come, our great prophet devoted his sermons delivered before the fall of Babylon in the year 538 (i.e., Isa., chaps 40-48) to an endeavor to create in his fellow-captives in Babylonia an enthusiasm to return and rebuild their state, when the opportunity should come. As the captives, many of whom were engaged

in prosperous business in Babylonia, did not avail themselves of this privilege when Cyrus triumphed in 538, a second series of addresses (Isa., chaps. 49-55), still further setting before them their opportunities and obligations, followed.

The great contribution of this prophet to Israel's religious thought consists of the new interpretation which he gave to Yahweh's choice of Israel, to Israel's mission, and to Israel's sufferings. His interpretation was in brief this: Yahweh had chosen Israel to be his interpreter to the world. Israel's election was accordingly an election to service, not an election for his own aggrandizement and glorification. His mission was to be Yahweh's missionary to the world, and his sufferings were a part of the appointed means by which he should make Yahweh known to the nations. He graphically represented Israel as Yahweh's servant; sometimes he was an unfaithful servant, dull of understanding and wayward of heart (Isa. 43:22-24), but at times, the chosen servant (41:8-9), upheld by Yahweh to bring justice to the gentiles (42:2-4; 49:1-4), who heroically endured the insults showered upon him (50:4-9). Finally, kings stand in astonishment at the servant's awful fate, and wonder why it should be (52:15) when they become conscious that his sufferings were for their salvation (53:4-6).¹ This interpretation of Israel's career reveals the prophet's profound insight into the nature of God, man, and life; the agony of the best becomes intelligible when its vicarious value is understood. This view gave the mission of Israel a moral significance and a spiritual purpose which transfigured it.

Indeed the prophet had conceived an ideal for the nation that a nation could never fulfil. It remained for Jesus of Nazareth, the ideal Israelite, to take up in his person and experience the work which the prophet had conceived as possible for the nation, and to make the ideal real.

The privileges granted by Cyrus had no immediate effect upon the fortunes of Jerusalem. A governor of the seed of David, Zerubbabel, whose name betrays his Babylonian birth, became

¹ Many interpretations of the "servant passages" in Isaiah are entertained by different scholars. These have given rise to an extensive literature. The writer has given his own view above, and lack of space makes the discussion of other views impossible.

ruler of Jerusalem, but the opportunities of gain which Babylonia offered proved to the majority of Jews far more attractive than the barren soil of Judaea. It thus came about that in the year 520 B.C., nearly a score of years later, the condition of Jerusalem had not changed. Its population was still the peasantry, who had never been carried to Babylonia; its temple and walls were still in ruins.²

Under these circumstances a drought occurred. In Palestine an insufficient rainfall always causes a famine. As in the days of David (II Sam. 21:1-14), men sought to understand why Yahweh had withheld his rain. Haggai, who now began to prophesy, declared that Yahweh was by this famine inflicting punishment upon his people for not rebuilding the temple. Another new prophet, Zechariah, appeared and enforced the same teaching. Their words were taken to heart; the people began to build. When the rainy season came around, copious showers fell, and all were satisfied that the prophets had rightly divined the cause of Yahweh's anger. The building went steadily forward, and two years later the temple was completed. Its splendor was far inferior to that of the former building, but it was nevertheless a "house" for Yahweh.

During this work the colony of Jews in Babylonia, which was for many centuries known as the "Captivity," began to exert its great influence in Palestinian affairs. They sent a large quantity of gold from which crowns were to be made (Zech. 6:9 ff.). As the text now reads, these crowns were to be set on the head of Joshua, the high priest, but many scholars believe that originally the text contained here the name of Zerubbabel. There were widespread revolts throughout the Persian empire during the first six years of the reign of Darius I. Babylon revolted twice, as did Susiana. Media and many other provinces attempted to gain their independence. Even his native Persia revolted once. In the disturbed state of the empire, it is probable that the Jews thought their time had come, and, hoping that Zerubbabel might prove a Messiah, strove in vain to regain independence.

²This is the view presented in the contemporary prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. Scholars rightly give these credence rather than the late account in Ezra.

After the rebuilding of the temple, historical sources fail us for more than seventy years. Probably it was during this period that that prophet arose whose work now constitutes Isa., chaps. 56-66. He endeavored to keep alive in Palestine the ideals for which the second Isaiah had so eloquently pleaded in Babylonia. He graphically portrayed the glory which awaited Zion (e.g., chap. 60), and endeavored to keep before the minds of his countrymen their great mission as the servant of Yahweh as this mission had been explained by the second Isaiah (see 61:1-4; 62:1). His words show that in at least one soul the highest ideals were still aflame, although the realization of them seemed farther away than ever.

Incidentally we learn from this prophet that some of the people had not yet been touched by the prophetic conception of religion. Here and there men were still found who sought relief from the hard fortunes of life in sacrificing unclean animals to heathen gods (cf. 65:11; 66:3-4).

Meantime the influences set in motion by Ezekiel were at work in other minds. At some time before 500 B.C., and perhaps as early as the second Isaiah,³ a writer whose name is now lost to us, compiled the so-called "Holiness Code," which, though here and there interpolated by later material, now forms the main part of Lev., chaps. 17-26. Like Ezekiel, this writer was devoted at once to the prophetic and priestly ideals. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is the thought that Yahweh is holy, and that, therefore, his people must be holy, insisted upon with so much emphasis. He compiled a code of laws, many of which represented practices much older than his time, the main purpose of which was to preserve the holiness of Israel. Holiness, as here conceived, was, as among the early Semites, partly a physical condition, but nevertheless there breathes through his work a lofty and passionate

³ Many scholars hold that this code was earlier than Ezekiel and that Ezekiel was influenced by it. That there is a direct literary connection between the two, is acknowledged by all. To the mind of the present writer the decisive evidence for the date given above is the full experience of exile and the promise of return expressed in Lev. 26:27-45. Those who claim an earlier date for the writer of the code regard 26:30, 34 f., 39-45 as later interpolations, but there seems no sufficient warrant for this.

devotion to prophetic ideals, which links his work to Deuteronomy and to that of Ezekiel. A little later, but before 450 B.C., another writer compiled the main body of priestly laws in the Pentateuch. To give his laws a literary setting he composed an account of the creation of the world, of the fortunes of the patriarchs, and of the exodus, of the covenant at Sinai, and of the conquest of Palestine. This writer carried the regulation of the ritual of worship into much greater detail than previous codifiers had done, though he, also, in many instances, but gave literary expression to many older practices. By means of the literary setting that he gave the whole it was made to appear that many of the institutions which the priesthood considered vital were primeval. The Sabbath was traced back to creation (Gen. 2:1-3), circumcision, to Abraham (Gen., chap. 17), and the distinction between priests and Levites, to Moses (Num. 3:5-21 ff.).

The religious atmosphere of this priestly document is very different from that of the prophetic writings. Its author was, it is true, a devout monotheist, but he apparently had no conception that God still communicated with men. In his thought God was a very exalted Being, all created things came into existence in simple obedience to God's word—but God was very remote. God had once spoken to Moses—how, we are not told—and had given to Moses the laws. Now the nation could know God only by obeying the laws thus divinely given. In this code monotheism had triumphed, but it had lost its warmth. The prophetic sense of familiar communication with Yahweh, with all the inspiring experiences which that involved, had given place to unimpassioned obedience to the commands of a far-off God, who once held communion with an especially favored man.

In the year 444 B.C. Nehemiah, a wealthy young Hebrew who was acting as a cupbearer to Artaxerxes I of Persia, obtained appointment to the governorship of Jerusalem, with permission to rebuild the walls. The story of the energetic way in which he accomplished this, contained in Neh., chaps. 1-7, is no doubt familiar to every reader. At the Feast of Tabernacles in October of that year a great concourse of people gathered before the water gate in Jerusalem, and Ezra, who is said to have brought the book

of the law from Babylon, read the law to the assembled multitudes, and before the month was over they had bound themselves to keep it. The law to which the people thus committed themselves certainly included the priestly code (cf. Neh. 8:14 with Lev. 23:33 f.). Probably that code had already been combined with the earlier documents substantially as we now find them in our Pentateuch, for otherwise it could not have displaced the older legislation. This combination was made so skilfully that the priestly laws seemed naturally to be the heart of the whole and the basis of the covenant with Yahweh at Sinai. To the superficial reader of the Pentateuch this still seems to be the case.

The introduction of the priestly legislation brought into Jewish life a puritanic spirit. Nehemiah and Ezra, who directed the movement, were ardent exponents of this spirit. In the language of the priestly laws, Israel was a "holy congregation." Nehemiah and Ezra determined that the nation should merit the name. In their view this could not be if Hebrews were not of pure blood, or if they associated closely with foreigners. They accordingly compelled those who had married foreign wives to put them away. This movement to purify the "congregation" of all foreign elements led to a schism. At Samaria there had existed for almost three hundred years a group of people who were anxious to be regarded as rightful worshipers of Yahweh. A part of their ancestry had been brought from eastern countries by Sargon of Assyria (II Kings 17:24-34), but these had at an early date embraced the worship of the God of Israel. These foreigners had intermarried with the Israelite peasantry whom Sargon left behind, so that their descendants were of as pure a Hebrew stock as many a Judaeon, although, unfortunately, the coming of their foreign ancestors was a notorious historical fact. From the beginning of Nehemiah's administration there was friction with these Samaritans. How tenaciously the Samaritans clung to the monotheistic worship of Yahweh and to Hebrew ideals is shown by the fact that they persisted in sharing the worship at Jerusalem until after the introduction of the priestly laws, which, like the Jews, they accept as a part of their torah. The puritanic movement, inaugurated by Nehemiah and Ezra, finally led them to withdraw, and, in

time, they built a rival temple on Mount Gerizim. The friction caused by this schism lasted for many centuries (cf. John 4:20-21).

Nehemiah and Ezra organized, not only the life of the people, but the ritual. The various orders of Levites were assigned their duties, some of them becoming the temple musicians. It was probably at this time that the first book of the Psalter, which then consisted of Pss. 3-41, was compiled and edited. It was named for David; why, we cannot now tell. Perhaps the hymn with which it opened was, or was believed to be, written by David. It contained, however the work of many later poets. Psalms 8 and 19, for example, make definite allusion to the work of the author of the priestly document.

In the period between Ezekiel and Nehemiah the prophetic movement reached its end. Never since has Israel produced prophets like those who composed Isa., chaps. 40-66. The two or three minor prophets who appeared later are so far inferior that they do not come into comparison. In these, its last great exponents, prophecy gave utterance to some of its profoundest and most spiritual ideals.

This period, too, witnessed the culmination of that movement which transformed the Hebrew nation into the Jewish church. This transformation began with the prophets of the eighth century; it had produced the fusion of prophetic and legal ideas in Deuteronomy, the blending of the prophetic and priestly interests in Ezekiel and the author of the Holiness Code, and finally the austere monotheistic laws of the priestly document. The external fortunes of the nation had providentially facilitated the adoption of the higher ideals, and the effort to conserve these ideals had called into existence a ritual which forever separated Israel from the heathen cults of her kindred.